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## THE MAGICAL UNIVERSE: GILBERT SIMONDON AND TECHNICITY

MASHINES BARBARISM, CAPITALISM, MACHINES, SIMONDON, TECHNOLOGY

*The old idea that man invented tools is ... a misleading half-truth; it would be more accurate to say that tools invented man.*

—Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future*

Long ago in that pre-history of the hominid ancestral narrative an ape picked up a pointed stick realizing for the first time it might help her dig up a tuber she was trying to pull out of the ground to feed her children. So goes the anthropological myth of human beginnings and evolution. The evidence for making and using tools dates back to half a million years before the origin of our genus. Making tools almost certainly helped toolmakers survive. Toolmaking would have facilitated access to a wider range of foods and the ability to process those foods more intensively or efficiently, likely making them more palatable and yielding more calories. In the case of meat and marrow eating, toolmaking would have opened up new sources of food higher in protein, fat, and calories than many other foods available in African savanna landscapes.

According to thinkers such as Gilbert Simondon the process of toolmaking would form part of a phase shift in the process of technicity underpinning one of the two modes of existence leading to homo sapiens:

This study postulates that technicity is one of the two fundamental phases of the mode of existence of the whole constituted by man and the world. By phase, we mean not a temporal moment replaced by another, but an aspect that results from a splitting in two of being and in opposition to another aspect; this sense of the word phase is inspired by the notion of a phase ratio in physics; one cannot conceive of a phase except in relation to another or to several other phases; in a system of phases there is a relation of equilibrium and of reciprocal tensions; it is the actual system of all phases taken together that is the complete reality, not each phase in itself; a phase is only a phase in relation to others, from which it distinguishes itself in a manner that is totally independent of the notions of genus and species. The existence of a plurality of phases finally defines the reality of a neutral center of equilibrium in relation to which there is a phase shift. (*The Genesis of Technicity*)

This sense of a system of phases that complete reality independent to the genus or species that is affected by its influencing power and force leads to that statement by Arthur C. Clarke in my epigraph: *"The old idea that man invented tools is ... a*

*misleading half-truth; it would be more accurate to say that tools invented man.*" For Simondon this notion of phase shifts should not be confused with a dialectical conception of evolution as progress. No. Against such a notion of oscillating phases as improvement, etc. Simondon tells us that "technicity results from a phase shift of a unique, central, and original mode of being in the world: the magical mode; the phase that balances out technicity is the religious mode of being." For Simondon this rupture in the heart of the magical mode of being is only another phase within a larger system of phases that will eventually lead back to a reunification of the magical mode:

Aesthetic thought appears at the neutral point, between technics and religion, at the moment of the splitting of the primitive magical unity: it is not a phase, but rather a permanent reminder of the rupture of unity of the magical mode of being, as well as a reminder of the search for its future unity. (2)

Another aspect to Simondon's argument is that Scientific Knowledge arises out of the mediation between technics and religion. It's this critical distance and tension in theoretical understanding of magic which gave birth to technology and religious modes of being which were joined in the aesthetic dimension of thought. A sense of aesthetic appreciation has been central to each of these phases; one that would bridge the distance and tensions of science and ethics. This tension in the aesthetic mode would give rise to theoretical and practical approaches to these various modes of existence, one that brought about the philosophical project. In Simondon's view the "primitive unity would be lost if science and ethics could not come back together at the end of genesis; philosophical thinking inserts itself between theoretical thought and practical thought by way of an extension of both aesthetic thought and the original magical unity".

At the heart of Simondon's genetic theory is an originary technicity in which homo was immersed in a magical universe: "Man finds himself linked to a universe experienced as a milieu". The concept of milieu which is understood by Simondon to be pre-individual and the source of the individual which is never exhausted but involves the individual in individuation, a process that for living beings is ongoing, a continuous theatre of individuation. As Andrés Vaccari states about Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time*:

In the human sciences, culture and language have also been progressively engulfed by the universe of technics: the artificial realm of institutions, rituals, knowledges, symbol systems and practices that makes humans functional, speaking, meaning-making creatures; that is, what makes humans *human*. The essence of the human, it seems, is the technical; which is paradoxically the *other* of the human: the non-human, the manufactured, unnatural, artificial; the inhuman even

It's this "universe of technics" which provides us a key to Simondon's notion of milieu. For Stiegler, the concept of "transindividuation" is one that does not rest with the individuated "I" or with the interindividuated "We," but is the process of co-individuation within a preindividuated milieu and in which both the "I" and the "We" are transformed through one another. Transindividuation, then, is the basis for all social transformation and is therefore a way of addressing what happens within education. As Simondon will tell it the "magical universe is already structured, but according to a mode prior to the segregation of object and subject; this primitive mode of structuration is one that distinguishes figure and ground by marking key-points in the universe". It's at these key-points in the universe that the various phase shifts give rise to the tensions between technics and religion, science and ethics. As Simondo puts it the "magical world is thus made of a network of places and of things that have a power and that are bound to other things and other places that also have a power. This path, this enclosure, this τέμενος [temenos] contains all the force of the land, the key-point of the reality and the spontaneity of things, as well as their availability." This binding of things to each other is the magical notion of sympathy.

We know that in the earliest forms of theurgic praxis within the High Magick of Egyptian civilization were based on this understanding of sympathy as the central force in the Cosmos. As Brian P. Copenhaver tells us:

Theurgy or 'god-working' – as distinct from theology or 'god-talk' – is a rite in two stages, a lower ritual to initiate the proceedings and a higher one to complete the process, whose aim is union (henôsis) with the divine. Lower theurgy, which appeals to cosmic gods, requires the ritual manipulation of material symbols (sumbola) and signs (sunthêmata) appropriate to those lower divinities. Its efficacy comes from the sympathy that unifies and vitalizes the cosmos.<sup>1</sup>

For the Sumerians, Mesopotamians, Egyptians and many other early civilizations magic, philosophy, and medicine were among the "arts, sciences and trades" provided by the gods "for mankind." Such learning and skill belong to the prophets whose "holy offices on earth ... are sited with the mysteries in heaven," in keeping with a cosmic law, that "things below ... sympathize with those above." Since the divine Craftsman has built this principle of sympathy into the cosmos, it is fitting for his ministers, the prophets, to foster the magical effects of sympathy and also to master the philosophy that shows how sympathy binds the cosmos together. If those lessons are learned and the soul is well nourished, the body too will be healed by medicine and thrive. (Copenhaver, p. 86)

In this sense Simondon would remind us that in seeking "to identify the remnants of magical thought in the context of the current conditions of life, we usually look at superstition as an example of the schemas of magical thought. Superstitions are, in fact, merely a degraded vestige of magical thought, and can only mislead the search for its true essence." The notion that magical thought has over time become enmeshed in degraded forms of superstitious use and praxis would lead to the severance of

science and magic during the long centuries of later Christian civilization and culture leading up to the Enlightenment and Secular democratic civilization and culture. As Simondon suggests this degradation, separation, and dismissal of superstitious thought should not be mistaken for the “high, noble, and sacred forms of thought, requiring a fully enlightened effort in order to understand the sense of magical thought” (4).

*The magical universe is made of a network of access points to each domain of reality: thresholds, summits, limits, and crossing points, attached to one another through their singularity and their exceptional character.* (The Genesis of Technicity )

For Simondon we have never left the magical universe, that even in our “current civilized life, vast institutions are concerned with magical life, but they are hidden by way of utilitarian concepts that justify them indirectly; in particular official holidays, celebrations, and vacations which compensate, with their magical charge, for the loss of magical power that civilized urban life imposes on us. (5)” Every aspect of our secular civilization is bound to magical modes of existence to which we have lost the keys. Because of its framing of magic as *superstition* modern scholarship from the Enlightenment to now has dealt only with the degraded forms of this ancient thought form rather than its truth. Through the long history of objectification of the world human thought became fragmented and disconnected from the figure/ground of its magical unity. This would lead to the technical object:

The technical object distinguishes itself from the natural being in the sense that it is not part of the world. It intervenes as mediator between man and the world; it is, in this respect, the first detached object, since the world is a unity, a milieu rather than an ensemble of objects; there are in fact three types of reality: the world, the subject, and the object, which is intermediary between the world and the subject, whose initial form is that of the technical object. (6)

This distancing of world, subject, and object would form the basis of our current secular culture and civilization which has displaced the magical unity that once existed in the primitive worldview. The rupture of the figure/ground of the magical universe gave rise to the separation of technics, technology, and the human. Providing the technical object and objectivity and distance as a figure (form) detached from the ground or original unity. In this sense technics and technical objects became autonomous entities in their own right divorced from the original figure/ground of the Real. Our long anxiety and relation with technics and technology is the outcome of this rupture. Our sense of the autonomy of technics and technology has led to many of our current fears and terrors of future AI and Robotics – the so called Superintelligence explosion or Singularity. As Simondon puts it,

Unity belongs to the magical world. The phase shift opposing technics and religion irreducibly leaves the content of technics with a status lower than unity and that of religion with a status higher than unity. This is where all the other consequences come from. (7)

A major point here is that in Simondon's view technicity and religiosity are not degraded forms of magic, or relics of magic; they come from the splitting in two of the primitive magical complex, the original reticulation of the human milieu, into figure and ground. It is through their coupling, and not in and of themselves, that technics and religion are the heirs of magic. (8) What was once immanent to the world itself suddenly became separated giving rise to external powers, gods, forms above and transcendent to the world, while at the same time our tools, instruments, and technical objects became autonomous and outside the ground incarnating the power of these ungrounded forces, gods, spirits, etc. Superstition reigned. In this sense superstition invaded the world of human thought, and religion “thus has by nature the vocation to represent the demand for totality; when it splits into a theoretical mode and into a practical mode, it becomes by way of theology the demand for a systematic representation of the real, according to an absolute unity; through morality, it becomes the demand, from the ethical point of view, for absolute norms of action, justified in the name of totality, superior to any hypotheticalal. (8)”.

Ultimately, for Simondon the aesthetic is the focal point between these various forms, an intermediary or site of neutral force that brings the ancient structuring process of the magical unity into reticulated perception by which technicity, the technical object, and religious, scientific, and ethical modes touch base with the figure/ground. And, although, the magical unity of the universe is not reunified in the aesthetic “it keeps itself in an intermediary state between pure objectivity and subjectivity (14)”. It's this tension between pure objectivity and subjectivity that enforces and regulates the magical unity that once existed and is still remembered in the reticulation of technicity, technics, and aesthetic thought.

As Arthur C. Clarke relates it we're about to move out of that phase in which technics and technology shaped us and instead the circle is turning toward something strange and new,

The tools the ape-men invented caused them to evolve into their successor, Homo sapiens. The tool we have invented is our successor. Biological evolution has given way to a far more rapid process-technological evolution. To put it bluntly and brutally, the machine is going to take over.<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, is hardly an original idea. That the creations of man's brain might one day threaten and perhaps destroy him is such a tired cliché that no self-respecting science-fiction writer would dare to use it. It goes back, through Capek's R.U.R., Samuel Butler' Erewhon, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and the Faust legend to the mysterious but perhaps not wholly mythical figure of Daedalus, King Minos' one-man office of scientific research. For at least three thousand years, therefore, a vocal minority of mankind has had grave doubts about the ultimate outcome of technology. From the self-centered, human point of view, these doubts are justified. But that, “I submit, will not be the only-or even the most important-point of view for much longer”. (Clarke) The

impassable barrier between the worlds of "inorganic" and "organic" chemistry are in our time being breached with various biotechnologies in which the human is becoming inhuman. In this sense the human is itself becoming a technological artifact, an artificial machinic being that in the coming century will reenter the magical universe but not in the old way of animistic perception but rather rejoining the technics and technology at the core of its own inhuman being.

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1. Copenhaver, Brian P. Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment. Cambridge University Press (July 31, 2015)
2. Arthur C. Clarke. Profiles of the Future (Kindle Locations 3222-3224). Kindle Edition.

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